

Where's That Document? –

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Even if you are moderately tidy person, this cry is likely to ring out several times a day in the working life of a busy lawyer while you riffle through the stacks of paper on your desk, through numerous folders in your PC, more folders in your email and inadequately labeled floppies – in search for that elusive piece of information that you need.

If you consider the number of billable hours spent trying to organise the mounting pile of paper on your desk or in your computer (not counting the seething frustration when you give up the search for good), a document management system that enables you to find information anywhere its located, at the precise time you need it, must surely be the most indispensable tool in any law office.

There is a common misconception amongst less technologically inclined lawyers that document management involves scanning the content of all your physical files into digital formats in a gargantuan mobilization exercise designed to convert your law practice into a "paperless" office. This is possible with an industrial strength scanner and sufficient manpower, but a "paperless" office is not the goal of a document management system.

In legal practice, knowledge in the form of precedents, research, opinions and past cases are your most valuable assets. A Document Management System ("DMS") imparts structure, organization and, most importantly, accessibility to your invaluable store of knowledge. What DMS is able to do for you and how it does is explained below –

Cataloging & Profile

A document management system (DMS) organizes all a firm's documents into a virtual library with instant search, retrieval and archival abilities. To do this it profiles every document that is created by intercepting the "save" command and presenting a screen that lets the author input his name, the client / matter associated with the document, the document type and descriptive summary. Similar to cards in a library catalogue, it creates a profile of each document from which a logical directory structure is built; thereby allowing the user to track a document's "life history" from its creation, through multiple versions, until it is finally archived.

Search & Retrieval

All effective Document Management Systems provide full text search to enable the user to access information within the body of the text that is not easily categorised or described in the document profile. An efficient DMS will enable Boolean searches (where search criteria is specified through a combination of words and phrases) and sophisticated searches framed on concepts, not merely on words. Full text searches give users wide open access to their documents and makes it virtually impossible not to find the specific document that the user is looking for.

Worldox deploys the extremely fast and capable **ISYS** search engine developed by Odyssey Development, industry leaders in search engine technology. A search through 7,500 documents in my network on the word "estate duty" took a mere 14 seconds and identified 16 documents (and this includes full text searches), while the same search using the search documents facility in MS98 operating system took 12 minutes.

Access, Security & Version Control

In a law office, collaborative authoring and editing of documents by teams of lawyers working on a project basis is commonplace. An efficient DMS provides a secure way for different users to coordinate their input across the same set of documents through a check-in / check-out system that prevents several users from working on the same document at one time. A check-in / check-out system also makes it possible for the DMS to create audit trails and maintain a historical activity record for each document.

Through the DMS, rights and restrictions may be assigned to specified documents based on individual users or groups of users; enabling managers to grant restricted editing rights over specified "master" precedents belonging to the firm's central document repository.

Any lawyer involved in drafting legal documents will understand how each document is merely a "draft" that can spawn multiple versions – sometimes creating new linear versions (ie, version 1, followed by version 2... and so on); and other times spawning several sub-linear version (ie, version 1, followed by version 1.2, then 1.3 and so on). An efficient DMS will track multiple versions of the same document described above; and provide red-lining tools that enable document comparison or will integrate seamlessly with sophisticated document comparison software such as DeltaView.

Archiving

A DMS provides a means to automate the removal of dated or "closed" files from the main office network. Better yet, it can ensure that data that has been removed from the main office repository to a secondary archival medium is nevertheless still open to search and retrieval, where the need arises.

Document Views

In a typical law office, information is likely to be stored in more than one type of file; ranging from different word processing programmes, to power point slides, excel spreadsheets, and html or image files in different graphic formats. An enterprise level DMS must be able to index information stored in different file formats so that the content is searchable. The DMS must also provide a means for the user to view these files without having to close one programme and open another; or even without the having the specific programme in your PC.

Remote Access

In an increasingly wired society, law firm extranets and virtual dealing rooms where clients and strategic partners have real time online access to information relating to their case is becoming commonplace; in fact, most high end corporate clients require this level of personalized service from their lawyers. In the same way, extranets have become an indispensable collaborative tool for international law firms. Most enterprise level document management systems in the market today offer remote access to the firm's document repositories through the web.

While large law firms with substantial data banks and years of accumulated knowledge have been compelled by need to implement some form of storage, search and retrieval system; smaller law firms are now beginning to recognize the benefits of installing a DMS to instill some order in their filing systems. This becomes most

apparent when staff leave and you cannot locate information due to the peculiarities of your staff's document filing methods.

As a consultant who works largely with small and medium sized firms, I recognize that these firms have limited budgets and few (if any) have professional IT staff on their payroll. In recommending the most suitable DMS for their purpose, the following criteria weigh most heavily for a firm with limited resources – the cost of the software including implementation and training (its real value in terms of meeting the law firm's business goals and needs as most market leading DMS will contain all the basic features described above); ease of use and administration; its ability to operate on existing IT infrastructure; and scalability in terms of its ability to service the growth of the firm.

An industry leading Document Management System suitable for small to medium sized law firms is **Worldox**; while other market favorites such as **iManage** and **DocsOpen** which requires an SQL (structured query language) server, are targeted at larger enterprises with deeper pockets, a substantial user base and satellite offices.

A principle difference between **Worldox** and **iManage** is the programme's architecture. This is of crucial importance when deciding which software is suitable for your law firm as it is the architecture that determines whether it will work on your current network without upgrading which may add substantially to the cost of implementation. Smaller law firms operating on a peer-to-peer network without a server running on WindowsNT or 2000 cannot use **iManage**.

The **iManage** Network is built on a three tiered client /server architecture – the first tier comprises the File Server where the documents are stored and the SQL database containing the document profiles and indexes; the middle tier is the **iManage** DMS Server that handles all client (or "user") requests for documents and hence controls access to the information in the first tier; and finally the third tier is the clients' PCs. While the 3-tier SQL client / server architecture makes **iManage** comparatively costly and administratively more cumbersome to maintain (best if the law firm has resident SQL and NT expertise); it also offers the best security as the middle-tier acts as a firewall to control user access to the SQL database and document repository.

The beauty of **Worldox** is that it does not need an SQL database to run. The absence of an SQL server easily knocks a few thousand dollars off the price of the software (and the operating cost of maintaining an SQL database). It is also remarkably easy to install and integrates easily into most existing IT networks without substantial upgrades or new servers; it even works on a no-frills Windows 95 peer-to-peer network. The only requirement is for one workstation to be dedicated to the job of "profiling" and "indexing". The most recent release, **Worldox 8**, now features seamless operation for remote users to synchronise their edited documents with existing documents in the repository when they reconnect with the network.

As the primary difference between **iManage** and **Worldox** is the presence / absence of the SQL database, the question most law firms need to decide is whether or not the cost of installing and operating an SQL database is justified. Advocates of SQL often cite the ability to exchange data among different software applications within the same firm (such as billing and case management) or information between different law firms when they merge as the most compelling reason to adopt an

industry standard database structure for the firm's store of information and knowledge. There is a fierce debate on this issue and I have added links to articles written by loyal advocates of the competing systems in the footnotes.

While scalability is a factor to consider when selecting a DMS, there is much sense in adopting a solution that will deliver all your immediate document management goals within your budget without burdening you with an over-ambitious scheme for future expansion while adding to your current operating cost.

For more information –

iManage – <http://www.imanage.com>

Worldox – <http://www.worldox.com>

“SQL-Free DMS” – A White Paper from World Software Corporation, the developers of WORLDDOX, explaining why they do not consider SQL to be essential for DMS.

http://www.worldox.com/product/wp_comparison.html

“ WORLDDOX WEB” – A White Paper on Web Access to WORLDDOX document repository and profile database from corporate intranets, extranets and the Internet

http://www.worldox.com/product/wp_wdweb.html